



American Story

Here Comes The Pony

"St. Joe to Sacramento . . . 1,900 miles in eight days!" Mark Twain could

hardly believe it. Here's his unforgettable picture of a great American feat

By MARK TWAIN

EDITOR'S NOTE: Few enterprises in our history have appealed to the imagination as has the Pony Express. Its history was curiously brief; it lasted a bare 18 months. The first rider left St. Joseph, Mo., on April 3, 1860. The last official trip took place 97 years ago next week. Telegraph lines advancing west took over the business of urgent communication and the stagecoach took over ordinary mail; the pony riders having proved the feasibility of a central overland mail route to California. The Pony Express went like the "flake of white foam" that Mark Twain describes in "Roughing It" (Harper & Brothers).

In a little while all interest was taken up in stretching our necks and watching for the "pony-rider" — the fleet messenger who sped across the continent from St. Joe to Sacramento, carrying letters nineteen hundred miles in eight days!

Think of that for perishable horse and human flesh and blood to do! The pony rider was usually a little bit of a man, brimful of spirit and endurance. No matter what time of the day or night his watch came on, and no matter whether it was winter or summer, raining, snowing, hailing, or sleeting, or whether his "beat" was a level straight road or a crazy trail over mountain crags and precipices, or whether it led through peaceful regions or regions that swarmed with Indians, he must be ready to leap to the saddle and be off like the wind!

He rode fifty miles without stopping, by daylight, moonlight, starlight, or through the blackness of darkness — just as it happened. He rode a splendid horse that was born for a racer and fed and lodged like a gentleman; kept him at his utmost speed for ten miles, and then, as he came crashing up to the station where stood two men holding fast a fresh, impatient steed, the transfer of rider and mailbag was made in the twinkling of an eye, and away flew the eager pair and

were out of sight before the spectator could get hardly the ghost of a look.

Both horse and rider went "flying light." The rider's dress was thin, and fitted close. He carried no arms — nothing not absolutely necessary, for even the postage on his literary freight was worth five dollars a letter.

His horse was stripped of all unnecessary weight, too. He wore a little wafer of a racing saddle, and no visible blanket. He wore light shoes, or none at all. The little flat mailpockets strapped under the rider's thighs would each hold about the bulk of a child's primer.

The stage-coach traveled about a hundred to a hundred and twenty-five miles a day (twenty-four hours), the pony-rider about two hundred and fifty. There were about eighty pony-riders in the saddle all the time, night and day, stretching in a long, scattering procession from Missouri to California, forty flying eastward, and forty toward the west, and among them making four hundred gallant horses earn a stirring livelihood and see a deal of scenery every single day in the year.

We had had a consuming desire, from the beginning, to see a pony-rider, but somehow or other all that passed us and all that met us managed to streak by in the night, and so we heard only a whiz and a hail, and the swift